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## **Navy Going Civilian For Its Medical Conversion**

***3,643 positions to be eliminated by 2011***

By James W. Crawley, Union-Tribune Staff Writer

The San Diego Naval Medical Center, the Navy's busiest hospital, plans to replace about 150 military doctors, nurses and technicians with civilians next year.

Similarly, 82 dental jobs at another San Diego command probably will be converted to civilian payrolls under a Navy-wide effort to initially switch 1,772 medical and dental positions starting in July 2005.

Trading cammies for civilian attire is part of a Pentagon program to hire more than 20,000 civilian employees or contractors during the next fiscal year. Within a decade, the conversions may affect 300,000 jobs among all branches of the service.

That will let the military shift more soldiers, Marines and airmen from support assignments to foxholes, tanks, cockpits and other war-fighting posts without increasing the number of men and women in uniform.

For the Navy, trimming its ranks through job conversions while it also continues mothballing older warships and aircraft means savings to build more modern ships - which use smaller crews - and aircraft.

But for next year, nearly every Navy cut will come from the medical and dental communities. Those billet conversions will be done through attrition and routine personnel transfers.

The Navy seeks to eliminate 3,643 health care positions by 2011, officials said. Although those reductions were revealed months ago, Navy officials only now are releasing information about the effects on individual facilities. Officials cautioned that conversion figures for hospitals and commands could change as plans are finalized.

They said no sailors, Marines or their dependents would have less medical treatment because of the shift from uniformed personnel to civilian health care providers.

### **'No degradation'**

"We still have to ensure there is no degradation in health care service," said Lt. Cmdr. Tim Weber, a Bureau of Medicine and Surgery official in Washington, D.C. "We're just changing the flavor of the uniform."

Locally, the Navy estimates it will spend more than \$18 million annually to pay civilian replacements for doctors, nurses, dentists and technicians. Navy-wide, the yearly cost will be nearly \$142 million.

A former top Navy doctor said the change should benefit the military by reducing waste and boosting efficiency.

"It is foolish for our nation to maintain people in uniform who do not have an operational role or a role directly in support of operational platforms," said Dr. Harold Koenig of San Diego, a retired vice admiral and former Navy surgeon general.

Koenig said Navy medicine has been overstaffed for a decade.

Medical personnel assigned to warships and Marine Corps units, stationed overseas and those mobilized during war will not be affected by the conversion process, officials said. No trauma specialists, such as emergency medicine, surgical or orthopedic physicians, are to be converted.

Pediatrics, general and family practice, internal medicine and psychiatry are primary-care specialties that will have the greatest number of conversions, according to a Navy breakdown. In all, 158 doctors' positions will be turned over to civilians, out of 3,417 physician billets in the Navy next year.

Servicewide, the Navy will shift 103 dentists - 10 percent of the 1,003 in uniform - to civilian ranks starting next year. An additional 236 enlisted dental technicians will be converted initially.

### **A 9 percent swap**

About 9 percent of the Navy's jobs for nonphysician professionals, such as hospital administrators, pharmacists, physical therapists, medical technologists and physician assistants, will be swapped from military to civilian.

Corpsman jobs, performed by 1,000 enlisted personnel, will be converted.

In total, next year's conversions equal more than 5 percent of Navy health care personnel. At San Diego's naval hospital, commonly called Balboa because it is in Balboa Park, military officials declined to comment about the changes.

Balboa and local military clinics will trade out 16 doctors, 11 registered nurses, 93 enlisted corpsmen and 23 other officers next year, according to preliminary figures from the Bureau of Medicine and Surgery in Washington.

The hospital admitted 23,388 patients last year, more than any other Navy hospital, and its clinics had nearly 1.4 million outpatient visits.

The Navy has 265 military doctors, four government physicians and 105 contract physicians, mostly specialists, on staff at Balboa. More than 850 nurses, including 373 in uniform, work at the medical center. About 3,600 others, including 1,816 sailors, also work there.

Changes at Camp Pendleton Naval Hospital will affect eight physician billets, six nurses, 34 corpsmen and 10 other officers. The Marine base has 139 Navy doctors, 145 nurses, 65 medical service officers and 767 corpsmen and dental technicians.

The Naval Dental Command in San Diego will shift 15 dentists and 64 dental technicians to nonmilitary positions.

**Filling the billets**

Before the Navy finalizes its conversions, commanders will determine if local job markets have enough civilian doctors, nurses and technicians to fill the Navy spots, officials said.

Civilian health professionals predict the Navy should be able to fill more than 300 positions for doctors, dentists, nurses and technicians in San Diego County.

"The key is the availability and successful recruitment and hiring of people to fill the eliminated positions," Koenig said. "I suspect that in the (Balboa) and Camp Pendleton areas, recruitment (of medical professionals) will not be a problem."

There should be enough doctors locally to handle the Navy's needs, said Tom Gehring, chief executive officer of the San Diego County Medical Society.

"In general, the primary-care areas, with the exception of obstetrics and gynecology, are not in shortage," Gehring said. On the other hand, "specialty physicians, now and in the future, will be in shortage."

Nurses, not doctors, could be the most problematic, Koenig said. California mandated patient-nurse staffing ratios at hospitals this year, which has increased demand for registered nurses.

"It may be more difficult to find civilian nurses because of the competition for them," Koenig said.

A spokesman for the California Nurses Association, a union representing hospital nurses, said the nursing ranks have grown in recent years because of increased enrollments at nursing schools and the state staffing requirements.

Currently, 289,000 registered nurses are licensed in the state.

The nursing group's Chuck Idelson said the Navy will have to compete for nurses with pay, benefits and working conditions.

"They'll be in the same boat as other employers in recruiting registered nurses," Idelson said.